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A Legend Returns To Saigon

It now appears that, at the same time he was announcing a policy to send 50,000 more troops to Vietnam—fewer than recommended by his military advisers in Vietnam and Washington—President Johnson was also deciding to send political reinforcements to Vietnam—also, apparently, to the displeasure of his military counselors.

The big political gun going to Saigon is one General Edward E. Lansdale, Air Force retired, who had a previous role in Vietnam, a decade ago, as an operative of our Central Intelligence Agency.

In that capacity he became famous and fabulous for his accomplishments behind the scene in Vietnam. These accomplishments apparently included propping up shaky governments, devising techniques for combatting guerrillas by undercutting their popular support out in the villages, and concentrating on "pacification" programs rather than on the burning of villages. In this role, General Lansdale purportedly became the model for the one "good American" in the novel about Vietnam called "The Ugly American." In this role, General Lansdale purportedly first helped the late President Diem stabilize his country politically, and then grew disillusioned with the same Vietnamese statesman as he turned stabilization into repression.

Now General Lansdale is on his way back to Saigon, as a special assistant

to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge. He is on his way back apparently at the request of Ambassador Lodge, who has himself been making statements that the ultimate solution in Vietnam has to be political. And General Lansdale is on his way back to Saigon apparently because President Johnson has decided to reinforce Ambassador Lodge in the kind of game he wants to play in Vietnam even though Defense Secretary McNamara and other military advisers are supposed to have opposed General Lansdale's return.

All this would indicate that President Johnson is playing the peace side, the political side, of our involvement in Vietnam a little more heavily than has hitherto appeared on the surface, where his actions have been less evenly divided than his words. Conceivably, the change in ambassadors to Vietnam, switching Lodge back to the duties General Taylor took over from him, has also been part of a general intention on the part of the President to trim his Vietnam policy more evenly between the military and political considerations, between the search for peace and computer-like calculations for war.

The fateful question is, of course, whether such a correction of previous imbalance in our Vietnam policy comes in time to have any slight chance of contributing its influence to actual events. Lodge may have his big man going back with him, but it is McNamara and all his men who now seem to have all the action.